CHAPTER 1

Introduction

"Have you ever heard of 'Gorky's curse'?" Nouritza Matossian asked me on a cloudy Thursday afternoon in March 2003. We were at her home in Hampstead (London) and I remember how tired I felt. Until that moment, I had been conducting research for two full months. Since my time in London was brief, I had filled my days with as many interviews as possible. Before I met with Nouritza, I had already spoken with the Armenian ambassador to Great Britain, an Armenian artist and an Armenian minister in London. I was actually too tired and too exhausted to satisfactorily conduct another interview. Yet her story caught my attention and would eventually be one of those interviews that turned my whole research upside down. Nouritza continued:

> There is a rumour going round the galleries of New York that Gorky's paintings are cursed. The painting *The Orators* has been damaged in a fire in 1957. Another painting – *The Calendars* – has been completely destroyed. Then there are rumours of paintings falling from walls and of a black-haired ghost in a blue overcoat that visits Gorky's old house in Sherman, Connecticut. The art dealers I have spoken with in New York are absolutely convinced that the work of Gorky is haunted.

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Nouritza Matossian[1] is the author of the book, *Black Angel: A Life of Arshile Gorky* (2001), and I first met her in February 2003 during a symposium at the Armenian embassy in London. She told me then that she was originally from Cyprus and had moved to England when she was 16. Later, on the aforementioned afternoon in March, I arrived to write down her life story and derive from what Geertz (1973) so poetically called the 'the webs of meaning': "… man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take cultures to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (Geertz 1973: 5). As a student, this quote had continually inspired me; it gave me a specific angle to view the dynamics of culture and cultural processes. Cultures weren't static, they were reproduced. They were webs that created meaning and during my interview with Nouritza, I had a better glimpse of these webs than I initially suspected.

> I did not really know who Gorky was. I mean, I had heard of him, and I had read something about his abstract art, but I had never seen any of his works. I thought he was a Russian artist who had taken refuge in the United States after World War I and the Bolshevist Revolution. He did not carry an Armenian surname.[2] Only much later I discovered that his real name was Vosdanig Manoug Adoian. I remember how I walked into Tate Gallery and how I was nailed to the ground when I saw *her* face on the wall. The painting was called *The Artist and his Mother* and I recognized it. There was something about those eyes. I don't remember exactly what, neither can I explain it, but they were so familiar to me that tears welled up. Looking back, I recognized something in all of his paintings – even the abstract ones. The Armenianness in his art was so obvious.[3]

[1] Nouritza is one of only two informants in my book who gave me permission to use their first and last name. All other names in my research are pseudonyms. When I asked Nouritza during our interview if she wanted to be assigned another name, she looked at me with a vague smile. "How many Armenians do you know who have written a biography on Arshile Gorky?" she slyly answered. "I can hardly stay anonymous, regardless how well intentioned your question is."

[2] Most Armenian surnames end with "-ian", which means "daughter/son of father" but also refers to a place of origin or the father's profession.

[3] The Armenianness in his art is however a point of discussion among art critics, art historians and biographers, like Auping (1995), Spender (2001) and more recently Herera (2003) who question the "Armenianness" in Arshile Gorky's paintings. His style is considered too "modern" and too "European" and too "American"-influenced to be

Nouritza's life story is a familiar one, as I heard the same from other female respondents of her generation. It is a story of resistance against tradition and of finding a balance between the Armenian culture and the culture of her Western host countries.

Nouritza was born in Cyprus on 24 April 1945—"a typical Armenian day," as she put it[4]—and lived in a district with Turkish and Armenian immigrants. "We kind of had to rely on each other. Our grandparents did not speak the Greek language and because of that we ended up in the same district as other immigrants. I now speak fluent English, Armenian, Greek and Turkish." The Armenian language and history

interpreted as "Armenian." The argument is that he used various styles throughout his career; some of his paintings were abstract, others surreal and some cubist. As an anthropologist, I follow these discussions with great interest. First, it places "European" and "American" art outside an international and cultural continuum. Second, culture and "cultural influences" seem to be set in a fixed state. If we follow these discussions closely, European and American art seem to exist without influence from other schools or are only being influenced by Western schools. The term Western indicates an emphasis on the word "modern," thus implying that non-Western cultural expressions are traditional. (This is also shown in the European and American centrism in international analyses.) By approaching culture as something that is fixed, the fluidity of culture and how non-Western art (if one considers this dichotomy) can be incorporated in Western art is neglected. These analyses indirectly imply that the Armenian style, whatever this is, is static, unchangeable and can be recognized by specific criteria. This approach underestimates the fluidity of cultural influences and specific themes—like frescoes, landscapes, cultural experiences—that are depicted in an abstract form. There is a greater argument to make here as well. Denying Arshile Gorky's cultural heritage in his work is also denying the experiences that shaped him as an artist. As Balakian (1996) emphasises:

> Can one imagine writing about the poet and Holocaust survivor Paul Celan without noting that he survived the Nazi's extermination plan for the Jews? And that his parents were Holocaust victims? Would one write about Marc Chagall's early work without delving into the climate of Anti-Semitism in Russia during the first decades of the century? Or about Picasso's paintings of the '30's without a consideration of what the Spanish Civil War meant to him? It should be equally unthinkable to write about Gorky without articulating the context and facts of the Armenian Genocide? (…) In an era before the Holocaust gave rise to a global discourse about genocide, Gorky sought to express what had happened to him, his family and his people. (ibid.: 60, 61)

Neglecting this dimension of Gorky's work is therefore ignoring the historical and personal impact the Armenian genocide had on him. It is in a way extending the discourse of denial, even if unintended.

[4]On April 24 Armenians commemorate the genocide, since on that day in 1915 a large part of the Armenian elite was captured by the Ottoman rulers. This event is seen as the onset of the genocide.

were not taught in the English primary schools and Nouritza remembers how on Saturdays she had Armenian lessons with other children her age. “I think that is the first thing Armenian immigrants did; start an Armenian primary school. The Turks and Greeks did not go to school. The Armenians quickly realized that education was the single most important thing to get ahead in the English society.”

Nouritza does not remember open hostility between Armenians and Turks. What she does remember is the close-knit subculture the Armenians developed within the district. “There were tunnels connecting Armenian households together and especially the women used the roofs to visit each other.”

Nouritza’s maternal grandmother had survived the genocide of 1915. “My father had come to Cyprus as a young boy in 1913. My grandmother ended up in Cyprus during the exodus in 1918.” From an early age, she had heard the stories of the death marches and how her grandmother and her first daughter, Satarnik (Nouritza’s aunt), made themselves as unattractive as possible. “They used ashes to rub their skins with, which made them look unnatural and ill.” Satarnik did not survive the death marches and her grandmother’s second daughter—Nouritza’s mother—was named in honour of her deceased sister. “It was a way to commemorate the past—an homage to their firstborn.”

Nouritza grew up in a subculture that was trapped in a constant sense of danger, partially due to the past and partially to the Armenians’ minority status in the district. “It was a community that constant felt threatened. ‘Don’t carry any jewellery’, my grandmother would say over and over again. ‘Don’t carry any jewellery, for they will cut off your fingers to get them.’” Or: “Never build a house when there is a Turk close, for you will irrevocably lose it”.[5]

As a young teenager, who in a large part received her education at an English primary school and could identify with the English

[5] In her research on the current Armenian community on Cyprus, Pattie (1997) points out that the same feeling of risk still exists in the Armenian-Cyprian communities: “The Armenians still in Cyprus watch and wait. They are not detached bystanders, for they have developed a strong sense of being Cypriot as well as Armenian, but they feel just as strongly their position as neither Turkish nor Greek. … They say, resignedly, that the real Armenian story is that of moving and rebuilding.” (ibid.: 37—sic).

community more than her parents could, Nouritza experienced the Armenian subculture on Cyprus as claustrophobic and confining due to the community's reaction to the Armenians' perceived risk. "It was a very patriarchal community. The preservation of the Armenian identity was seen as a sacred goal. To marry a non-Armenian, an *odar*, was the equivalent of death. You were banished from the community."

At 16, Nouritza left for England, where she eventually married a German–American musician.

> I think I very deliberately did not choose an Armenian, although we did have an Armenian wedding. The irony, therefore, is that in England, more even than in Cyprus, I became aware of my Armenian cultural background. In Cyprus, you were part of a clearly defined community, whereas here [in England] you only sporadically would meet Armenians. You did not see each other that often. Only in England, I *really* became interested in Armenian history.

Nouritza's contact with Gorky's paintings therefore was more than an acquaintance between an art-lover and an artist. It was a meeting between a painter who deliberately changed his surname, and a young woman who was searching for the traces of her cultural heritage at that time in her life.

Now, years later, that same woman was sitting in a half-dark living room. "Take a look at this painting," she said, while she sat down next to me on the couch with an enormous book. It was a painting of a tall boy, who was standing next to his mother, his dark eyes staring at the spectator with a penetrating gaze. The woman looked fragile and pale in comparison to the boy. "Pay attention to the hands, they are drawn vague and volatile. The details are mostly in the face. As if Gorky forces you to look at the faces, as if he preferred you to ignore everything around it. Now look at this," and she grabbed another book from the small table in front of us and showed me a black and white picture of a mother and a son. The comparisons between the picture and the painting were sublime. Maybe the dress of the woman had changed of motive and colour, and Gorky had used his brown, blue and red pastel nuances to bring a warmth, but also a haunting atmosphere to the canvas that was missing from the black and white photograph. A single glance said it all—this was a self-portrait. The painter clearly tried to tell us something here that would gain meaning in the context of his entire oeuvre. Nouritza said, "It took him years to make this painting. There are a lot

of sketches found in which he drew the face of his mother from different angles. He eventually made two versions." The eyes of the mother were staring mysteriously at me. They were both sad and warm at the same time. "Typical Armenian eyes," Nouritza added, as if she had read my mind.

Even before I started my research, I would go out socially with a long-time Armenian friend. I remember in 2002, I went to a pizzeria and he introduced me to three other Armenians, which was a strange and surreal experience. Here was my friend whom I had known for years, but who I had never heard speak in a language I did not know. I was cordially received at the table, and I remember that our conversations quickly moved to politics, the Armenian genocide, Armenian art and "Armenianness,"[6] which as an anthropologist-to-be interested me immensely. I heard a story that night, which I would hear later during my research in several variations. It was a story about two Armenians who did not know each other by name or face, but who *recognized* each other as Armenians as soon as they passed each other on the street. "How can that be?" I asked at one point during the conversation. "The eyes," they answered. "It's the look in their eyes. You recognize it immediately."

Now, a pair of those eyes was staring back at me from a book. "What other paintings did he [Gorky] make?" I asked Nouritza. She at once showed me a couple of photographs. These were pictures of busy and abstract paintings, full of ink stains—or so they seemed to be to my untrained eyes—that poured into each other, collided, and cut across the canvas with lines and curves. *Agony, Diary of a Seducer* and *They Will Take My Island* were titles that caught my gaze. They lacked the warmth and softness of the first painting of a mother and a son. "Do you see it?" she asked, simultaneously leafing through the book and looking at me. "Do you see the difference? Between this painting (*The Artist and His Mother*) and the paintings that followed?" I nodded. The first one was a portrait and harmonious, the others were fragmented and abstract. "This one was inspired by a picture, a memory *before* the genocide. The other, darker works came in the time *after*…"

[6] I have spoken with a variety of Armenians in several settings before, during and after my research, but I am still surprised at how these subjects continuously blend together.

1.1 Arshile Gorsky

According to Turner (1988), cultural performances, such as art, movies, music and theatre, are windows in which societies portray themselves, windows from which we can derive meanings about life and the tangible world around us and how it is construed: "Cultural performances [are] a … drawing board on which creative actors sketch out what they believe to be more apt or interesting 'designs of living'" (ibid.: 24). Still, this is only one part of the whole story. Art not only gives meaning, but is part of a larger entity, as Gorky himself stresses: "I don't think there is any absolutely original art in the purest sense of that term. Everyone derives from accumulated experiences of his own culture and from what he himself has observed. Art is a most personal, poetic vision or interpretation conditioned by environment" (Mooradian 1978: 284).[7] If art is a reflection, then how was I to interpret those disparate paintings? What were they telling me about Arshile Gorky, and by extension, about "Armenianness"?

Arshile Gorky was born 15 April 1902 in the village Khorkom, south of Lake Van in Turkey. He was the son of a relatively prosperous farming family, which possessed 300 sheep, 20 goats and 2 horses (Matossian 2001: 10). During his entire life, Gorky would romanticize his youth in Khorkom, a youth he would later commit to canvas in several paintings between 1936 and 1944. The paintings *Image in Xhorkom* (deliberately misspelled to hide his background for art historians), *Plow and the Song*, *How My Mother's Apron Unfolds in My Life*, *Water of Flowery Mill* and *The Liver is the Cock's Comb* all depict his youth and homesickness for his motherland. In 1945, he told his friend Breton about the extent to which his past and his memories came together in his paintings.

[7]There is a current debate between art historians about how many of these quotes are actually from Arshile Gorky. It is suspected that the letters in Karlen Mooradian's (Arshile Gorky's cousin) biography of Gorky were invented by the author. This would most likely have been politically motivated. Matossian (2001: xiii, xiv), the only person other than Mooradian who had access to the letters Gorky wrote to his sister, defends this theory. I have stayed away from this debate as the authenticity of the letters has never been proven. I defend my position from an anthropological point of view by stating that even if these remarks were not made by Gorky, they would have been made by his cousin. Either way, these comments reflect how the author (Gorky or Mooradian) thought about his Armenian identity and heritage.

> I tell stories to myself, often, while I paint, often nothing to do with the painting. Have you ever listened to a child telling that this is a house and this is a man and this is the cow in the sunlight… while his crayon wanders in apparently meaningless scrawl all over the paper? My stories are often from my childhood. My mother told me many stories while I pressed my face in her long apron with my eyes closed. She had a long white apron like the one in her portrait and another embroidered one. Her stories and the embroidery on her apron got confused in my mind with my eyes closed. All my life, her stories and her embroidery keep unravelling pictures in my memory as if I sit before a blank white canvas. (ibid.: 377)

Gorky's mother played a very important role in his life. After his father left for the United States in 1908, she was the only person aside from his sister whom he trusted and depended on. His mother symbolized his youth and innocence and the years before the genocide.

In November 1910, Gorky's family moved to Aikesdan on the outskirts of Van. It was here, in 1912, that the photograph that became the blueprint for his two paintings *The Artist and His Mother* was taken. In letters to his sister, Gorky would often refer to this time in Aikesdan, mentioning the beauty of the landscape, the mountains, the crops, the flowers, which stayed with him and as he noted, became a part of his paintings and psyche.

> I communicate my innermost perceptions through art, my worldview. In trying to probe beyond the ordinary and the known, I create an interior infinity. Liver. Bones. Living rocks and living plants and animals. Living dreams…these debts I owe to our Armenian art. Its multiforms, its many opposites. The invention of our folk imagination. These I attempt to evoke directly, that is the folklore and physical beauty of our homeland, in my works. (Mooradian 1978: 275, 276)

On 28 June 1914, Franz Ferdinand was killed in Sarajevo. In the months that followed, World War I broke out due to mutual treaties between France, Russia and Great Britain on one side and Germany and Austria-Hungary on the other. On 2 August 1914, the Ottoman Empire signed a treaty with Germany to ensure protection against Russia, and on 29 October, Turkish troops attacked the Russian harbours of Odessa, Sebastopol, Novorossisk and Feodosija (Keegan 2001: 241). Russia declared war on the Ottoman Empire three days later, and in December 1914, Turkish troops invaded Russia through the Caucasian border.

For Gorky, these developments took place at a distance. Like others in Van, he heard the rumours of the defeat of the Turkish troops, the Russians' advance, and the massacres that Turkish and Kurdish soldiers had committed in several Armenian villages. Armenian leaders in Van decided to put up defence lines and dig trenches around the city to protect themselves from possible bandits and Turkish troops. Gorky's sister Vartoosh recalled years later how she prayed with her family every night. "In Aykesdan we prayed before going to sleep…. We only prayed that God give peace, that war shouldn't happen, and God guard our lives. Mummy said this aloud and we made the cross and knelt" (Matossian 2001: 61, 62). On Monday 6 April, the city of Van was besieged by Turkish and Kurdish troops under the leadership of Jevdet Bey (the governor of the province). The bombardments immediately set the suburb of Aikesdan on fire.[8]

The defence of Van—one of the few cities where Armenians successfully resisted the Turkish troops—has attained an almost mythical status amongst Armenians. The Armenian defence lines held using only 300 rifles and 1000 pistols, and on 16 May, the Turkish platoons retreated when the Russian troops arrived (Matossian 2001: 65). Gorky, who was a messenger boy during the defence, never forgot the bloodbath the Turkish troops left in the area. Fifty-five thousand Armenians were found killed in a field nearby. Entire villages and churches were burned to the ground and in the village of Akantz, the entire male population (2500 men) was murdered in one afternoon, before the eyes of everybody in the village (ibid.: 71). Many years later, in 1947, Gorky would try to commit those images of pillars of corpses to canvas in his painting *Summation*. This was an extraordinary act, since he rarely spoke about the horrors of his youth. Gorky only mentioned his memories of these massacres in a single letter to his sister.

> I believe I have experienced more than my fellow artists. This does not automatically enable me to know more. But it does enable me to respond necessarily to more experiences than they have had the ability to observe directly. As Armenians of Van…you know well how we were forced to experience with greater intensity and in a shorter time what others can only read about while sitting in comfort. We lived and experienced it. The bloodshed

[8] In the novel *Aykesdane Ayrevoum E*, by Kourken Mahari describes these events. The title is freely translated in "Aikesdan is on fire".

> of our people at the hands of the Turks, the massacres and genocide.[9] Our death March, our relatives and dearest friends dying in battle before our eyes. The loss of our homes, the destruction of our country by the Turks, Mother's starvation in my arms. Vartoosh dear, how my heart now sinks in even discussing it. (Mooradian 1978: 266, 267)

Meanwhile, the "Great Armenian Catastrophe" (as it was called before the Second World War)[10] became more widespread and organised in the early months of 1915. Local governments were secretly assigned to annex Armenian property, round up Armenian leaders and prepare the Armenian population for large-scale deportations (Matossian 2001: 64; Chaliand and Ternon 1983: 36). On 24 April 1915, new orders and regulations were concretely manifested when 650 prominent Armenians (doctors, writers, academics, poets, composers, politicians, and lawyers) were rounded up. Some were tortured and executed and others deported by train to the Syrian desert. In one firm sweep, the Armenian community embedded in the Ottoman *millet* system was adrift.

On 15 June, the Russian offensive began to collapse and the Russian soldiers were forced to retreat. Two hundred thousand Armenian refugees travelled away from their homeland with the Russians. Gorky's mother decided to flee to Erevan (now Yerevan), and her daughter Vartoosh remembered this journey vividly:

> Walking night and day for eight days, our shoes were all gone. We clambered over hills and fields. We slept at night a little bit but we had to wake very early to set off because the people who left after us were all killed on the field of Bergri. The Turks attacked and killed them, almost 40 or

[9]The word "genocide" is peculiar in this letter and strengthens the argument that the letters were fabricated. The word, even though first used in his book "*Axis Rule of Occupied Europe*" by Lemkin in 1944 and later in 1945 and 1946, in his publications, the word was not officially coined until 1948 during the Geneva Conventions. That this word is used in a letter of 1947 either implies that Gorky was aware of the word or that the letters are indeed fabricated. Before the word "genocide," the Armenian massacres were known as the Armenian Catastrophe. The truth is, we do not know. I leave it here because it conceptualizes Gorky's past, either through Mooradian or Gorky himself. It could be a shifting of the words that Mooradian made on purpose to emphasize what happened to the Armenians. See also footnote seven.

[10]The word "genocide" is derived from the Greek word "genos"—which means race/clan—and the Latin word "cide," which is derived from the action "to kill" (Hinton 2002: 3).

> 50,000 were killed there. Some went down to Persia, but we took the route to Erevan. (Matossian 2001: 80)

In August, Gorky's family, the Adoians, arrived in Erevan. The city was flooded with refugees who were famished and in search of food and water. The American doctor, Ussher, who was working for the Red Cross and had fled with the Armenians, would later record a vivid description of this desperate situation in his memoirs.

> We reached Igdir, Monday, August 10. During that week more than two hundred and seventy thousand refugees poured over the border into the Caucasus…the Erevan plain filled with a shifting multitude overflowing the horizon, wandering aimlessly hither and thither; strangers in a strange land, footsore, weary, starving, walking like lost and hungry children. (Ussher 1917: 314)

In Erevan, Gorky quickly found a job in a carpet shop with the help of family members who lived there, and in the years 1916 and 1917, the family tried to build their lives again, as did thousands of other refugees. On 28 May 1917, Russia and the Ottoman Empire signed a treaty and in the fall of 1918, the Turkish government set up blockades to prevent goods and products from reaching the New Armenian Republic. In the winter that followed, 200,000 Armenians died—1/5th of the Armenian population (ibid.: 97). Gorky's mother was among them. She died of starvation on 19 March 1919, in the company of her son and daughter. In an interview, years later, Vartoosh gave a detailed account of her mother's death.

> She was debilitated, her stomach was swollen and her long fingers had become spindly. Her eyes were sunken and cavernous, she had sores in her mouth and her lips were coated and furry. She was dictating a letter to her husband…. 'Write that I can never leave Armenia. That I will never come to America. They've abandoned us completely.' Then suddenly we saw that mother had died. (Matossian 2001: 98)

In 1920, Gorky and his sister travelled to the United States, where Arshile would begin to focus on his art. In 1922, two paintings appeared in an exposition, signed by an unknown "Ardie Gunn" and "Ardie Colt" (ibid.: 125), and in 1923, a certain "Arshile Gorky" registered at the Boston University of Fine Art and Design. It is unclear

why Gorky decided to change his name at this time. Some critics and art historians argue that he did so for pragmatic reasons. Other biographers argue that his name change had a symbolic meaning. However, it is important to place his metamorphosis in the context of the 1920s. In that period, Armenians were known as "starving Armenians" and carried the stigma of being "needy" due to several public charity events in the 1920s. Arshile fought against this image and deliberately chose a Russian surname, since in the eyes of most Americans, Russia had an air of mysticism, courtesy and purity (ibid.: 131) and did not have the same connotation as Armenian names. Since Arshile had lived in Russian Armenia for several years and spoke the language, a Russian identity was one he could easily assume. He had, after all, become politically aware in Russia where he changed from a boy fleeing the war into a mature young man who took responsibility for his sister.

The Russian poet Maxim Gorky was an important factor in Gorky's conscious awakening. Maxim, a hero for many Armenians, was a celebrated writer who had translated Armenian poets into Russian and gained political attention in 1916 by condemning the massacres of poets in Turkey (Matossian 2001: 91). The name "Gorky" was therefore a perfect pseudonym for Arshile; it was a Russian name, but referred indirectly to his Armenian roots and the genocide.[11]

There is, however, another interpretation for the name change. Matossian reminds us that in ancient times, in traditional Armenian churches, priests sometimes distanced themselves from their family surnames and simultaneously adopted spiritual names. This change symbolised a breach with the past and the start of a new Christian identity (ibid.: 91). One could interpret Arshile Gorky's name change in the same way, and consider it an indication of a lost past, a breach with the "before" and the starting point of a "new" identity that would never be the same after the events he had experienced.

In the 1930s, Gorky worked as a teacher at the *Grand Central School of Art* in New York and slowly created a name for himself in the art circuit. Gorky's career from this time was uneven with several high points, and particularly during and after the Depression, deep hardships and poverty. From 1940, he painted his most famous paintings, which were

[11]The name Maxim Gorky was in itself a pseudonym. Gorky means "bitter." Arshile is Russian for Achilles. The name translated therefore means Achilles the Bitter (Balakian 1996: 63).

admired for their expressive character and for the way he mixed abstract and surrealist influences in his compositions. Still, he could not let go of his past since it often came back in his sketches and paintings.

"Arshile Gorky," as Matossian would tell me decades later in a dusky living room, "was a man with a photographic memory. He could remember drawings and paintings within the finest detail and I am of the opinion that he subconsciously incorporated the Armenian art he had seen in his youth in his paintings. Take a look at these frescos," she said, while she reached for another book of photographs and put it on her lap. "The static faces and oval eyes come back in his portraits. Or these *Khachkars*[12] which are clearly incorporated in his abstract sketches. Retrospectively I think that I recognized these Armenian references in his art. That is why when I saw his paintings for the first time, I had such an emotional reaction … The Armenian art is so strong and so subtle. It absorbs you."

In the years between 1926 and 1944 Gorky obsessively worked on two pieces that would make him famous, *The Artist and His Mother*, based on the same photograph, but distinct in colours and background.[13] The first painting, painted between 1926–1936, has warm pastel colours, while the second painting, painted between 1929–1942, is more expressive. Both paintings are now generally regarded as his masterpieces and differ significantly from his other paintings. They are portraits, neither surreal nor abstract, and contrary to his other pieces, each has a smooth surface without the thick daubs of paint that are characteristic of most of Gorky's work.[14] The painter Schary explains how time consuming this painting must have been:

[12] Khachkars are Armenian stone crosses (sometimes also carved out of wood) and I was told by several artists that these are specifically Armenian. The cross is the symbol of Christ. The interwoven flower on top of it symbolizes eternity. The lines on the sides of the stone are interwoven and have neither beginning nor end; they represent the connection between humans and God. As another informant told me, the bow around the cross symbolizes God's reciprocity. It represents the relationship of the earth with God and God with the earth. The stone cross shows this entire cycle.

[13] The first painting of this set can be found in the Whitney Museum of Art in New York, and the second painting in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. In the first painting, the prominent colors are yellow and blue and the face of the mother is livelier. In the second painting, the color red is more prominent and the mother's face seems like a death mask. I will come back to this in later chapters.

[14] During this period, Gorky made two other portraits: *Self Portrait* (ca. 1937) and *Portrait of Master Bill* (ca. 1937).

> This picture took a hell of a long time. He'd let it dry good and hard. Then he'd take it into the bathroom and he'd scrape the paint down with a razor over the surface, very carefully until it got as smooth as if it were painted on ivory. You look at the picture and you won't be able to tell how he did it because there are no brushstrokes. Then he'd go back and paint it again, all very fine and done with very soft camel-haired brushes. He scraped it and he scraped it and he scraped it. Then he'd hold it over the bath-tub and wipe off with a damp rag all the excess dust and paint he'd scraped off. That's how he got this wonderful surface. It's the only painting he ever did that way. (Matossian 2001: 216, 217)

According to Matossian, the first painting of the set resembles the Armenian frescos in the Church of the Holy Cross in Aghtamar in composition and colours, which Gorky studied during this period. The faces are brought back to simple geometrical patterns. The eyes are oval and dark (ibid.: 215), and the emphasis is on the faces. We also see the symbolism of life and death, especially in the second version where the son is colourful and vivid, and the mother is grey and deadly. Her eyes stare accusingly from the canvas.

The paintings are more than a mere reproduction of a photograph. They are memories, a story told in colours. The painting is a monument to a mother who died because during the aftermath of the genocide and was buried in a mass grave. Decades later, his sister still recalled the moment that Gorky showed her one of the paintings for the first time. He brought her into his studio and said: "'Vartoosh dear, here is mother. I am going to leave you alone with her' …. Oh, I was so shocked! Mother was alive in the room with me. I told her everything and I wept and wept" (ibid.: 218).

In the years between 1946 and 1948 Gorky suffered a series of setbacks. In 1946, he fell ill and had to undergo a bowel operation. In 1947 and 1948, he was regularly depressed and his marriage to his second wife, Agnes Magruder, started to disintegrate. On 21 July 1948, Arshile Gorky wrote the words "Goodbye my loveds[15]" on a wall with white chalk, and committed suicide. He was 46 years old.

"He hanged himself," Nouritza said, while she closed the book and turned on a lamp. "I could never get rid of the thought that he

[15]This is a literal translation of the Armenian words "*Eem seereliners*" (Matossian 2001: 475).

killed himself in the same way other artists were murdered in the old Ottoman Empire.[16] To understand Arshile Gorky is to understand Armenia. He touches the core of our 'being'–our essence. He represents our identity." I had heard this statement from another informant, whom I refer to as Misha, further on in this book, and with whom I had had numerous conversations about Armenian art. "The story of Gorky makes me weep," Misha once told me. "When I saw the paintings, tears were streaming down my face." I never really paid attention to these comments at the time, but after my conversation with Nouritza, I suddenly saw Misha's comments in a new light. If performances are "reflections" of communities and cultures, as Turner (1988) emphasizes, what could the life story of Gorky—and the value it holds for Armenians—tell us about Armenian culture and identity *now*? What symbolism was hidden behind these stories and paintings?

I stood up, overwhelmed by the flood of information I had received, and shook Nouritza's hand. Outside it had already grown dark. For the first time, I realised how everything in a culture is connected and how subtle the webs of meanings are interwoven with each other (using Geertz's terminology [1973]). The story of Gorky, as Nouritza had related to me that afternoon (and as I would later read in her biography), is a tale about the Armenian identity. It is filled with cultural constructions and concepts. It is an imagined landscape of how the Armenian experience is supposed to be. I suddenly realised, while I moved towards the door and thanked Nouritza again for the interview, that my research question had to be adjusted straight away. My original question was too naive and one dimensional, almost too static. My original view lacked the dynamic and interwoven nature of the Armenian experience. My original question—*how does the Armenian genocide influence the contemporary Armenian cultural experience*?—was too direct and too simplistic. It did not encompass the themes of identity, national feelings and ideas of "self". How did a population manage to overcome something as drastic and evasive as genocide? How does a community survive such a blow?

[16]This is an issue Nouritza also brings up in her book. There she writes: "I recalled photographs of Armenians hanging from gallows in public squares with idle Turkish soldiers leaning on their rifles. Had Gorky punished himself for a dreadful crime?" (Matossian 2001: xii).

When I rode back home in the subway, I asked myself the questions that, in all honesty, I should have asked myself at the start of my fieldwork. What is Armenianness? How do Armenians view their world? And what was, judging by the emotional reaction of my informants, the all-encompassing meaning of Gorky's paintings of a mother and her son?

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